The Other Shepherd

Ernest Bareing

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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BETHLEHEM OF JUDÆA

The Other Shepherd

A Tale of the First Christmas
Among the Shepherds
of Bethlehem

By ERNEST C. WAREING

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WITHDRAWN

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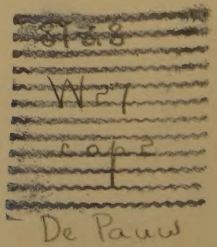

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TO THE SHEPHERDESS OF MY FOLD

PROLOGUE

THE prophet hath spoken. The day of fulfillment is at hand. All nature rises toward the high registers of the fullness of life. The Jordan, the Mæander, the Tiber, the Seine, the Rhine, and the Nile rise in their banks. Their volume deepens, their currents return upon their courses. The trudging earth rolls itself in an effort to quicken its pace. The Mediterranean moves with a strange and mighty tide, filling to the full coves and caves, bays and lagoons, bayous, flumes, and sand-strewn estuaries, as though a great hand had been laid on its bosom whose weight drives immensity from beneath it.

It is a day of release of power. The cedars of Lebanon are shaken. From the regions of Bashan comes the roar of disturbance. The dark fastnesses of Engedi are stricken with a great light. The oracle of Delphos is incoherent with distressing ambiguities. Olympus, crowned and throned by deities commanding the worship of monarchs and the allegiance of empires, is shadowed into darkness.

Light is breaking in the East. Mount Hermon,

standing in full sight of all the Promised Land, beholds a drama of supernatural dimensions. Jerusalem the Golden; Damascus, flower of the desert; Antioch, dwelling place of merchant kings; Samaria, mother of the dead past; Jericho, city of historic grandeur, find their streets flooded with a phosphorescent light. The heavens carry it forth like a panoply of a summer morning.

The cities of the West awaken. Athens, the bright star of Ilium; Ephesus, the gate of the morning dawn; Corinth, the harbor of a thousand ships; Philippi, producer of purple and fine linen; Rome, the Eternal City, all mutely bend before the hush of an engaging whisper.

The cohorts of Jehovah are passing. Creatures of mist and time attend and see not, apprehend and understand not. The occupants of immensity are shifting. They exchange places and appear in new formations. There is trumpeting among the stars. In the galaxy of Pisces one is rent from its course and sent forth as on a mission. It passes out across the sky, avoiding meteoric swiftness. It appears, a messenger in stately form unaccompanied by a shaft of light. It descends in a curtain of darkness. It releases light on its earthly side. It lowers its matchless form into the region of the dwelling place of man.

The house of Jacob holds a great light. Prophets are disturbed in their dreams. The high priest, sleeping in the Temple hard by the Holy Place, is panoplied by smoke of incense suddenly rising into form and movement, as though blown by a violent draft. The sacred vessels of silver and gold jostle and become vibrant with whirring sound. The veil of the Holy of holies parts as though by the passage of a ministering spirit seeking the altars of the living God.

Jehovah, the source of Israel's matchless might, appears, proclaiming the coming of One whom the Lord of all the earth delighteth to honor.

The age of seers and prophets is passing.

The days of Messiah are come!

THE DAY OF FULFILLMENT

THE paths of the plain of Bethlehem are clouded by the dust of hurrying flocks at evening time. A worn traveler, with his beast of burden, slowly winds his way toward the sequestered village. The shadow of night falls across the tranquil scene where man and beast seek restoration from the fatigue of a wearisome day.

A lone shepherd stands upon a distant hill, far from the highway, scanning the landscape in search of a lost sheep. Malchiah had traveled far that day. An ewe with her lamb had strayed. Her disappearance perplexed him beyond the measure of his keenest wit. He could ill afford to lose her. He was young, and his flock had not yet grown to profitable proportions. The day was almost gone. Weary and discouraged, there was nothing for him to do but return to the fold. In that direction he started with the burden of a depressing sense of loss. He took pride in his record; he had never lost a sheep. "The good shepherd never loses his sheep," was his creed.

He seated himself by the roadside, hoping that some way out of his dilemma might appear. He was not easily

defeated. Resolute and resourceful, he had trained in the school of self-denial and physical endurance. His tall frame was set with muscles hardened by a dauntless spirit. He was built to measure strength with the beasts of the fields. His eyes were supported by lines of intelligence, refusing to hide themselves away beneath deep brows that distinguish men as star gazers and prophetic dreamers. His movements were quick and restless, his face eager and sensuous. Fatigue wrestled long with him before he acknowledged its mastery.

While he thought, the silences of the hills and vales stole in upon him. He became conscious that someone was approaching. Footfalls came from the distance, beyond a turn in the road. His first impulse was to flee. Further counsel with himself suggested that he slip behind a large bowlder near the roadside.

The travelers drew near. There were two of them, father and son. The elder carried a zither. The younger was a lad in his early teens. They halted near where Malchiah watched. He could have reached out and touched either one of them. They leaned against the great stone. The father began to play the musical instrument. Its sweet tones came forth with distinct and measured har-

mony. Malchiah readily recognized the hand of a master. The lad began to sing an evening hymn familiar in all that region. The voice was one that nature had endowed with marvelous compass and a quality not possessed by the men and women of the Jewish people. He was listening to an Ethiopian minstrel.

The lad sang until his melodious voice filled all the countryside. The range of his song reached the hills, traveling upward until it became a sustained echo upon the evening breeze, like a lost melody hastening away from the voice that sent it forth, frolicking and capering toward the altitudes. Then it broke into various forms, swinging back upon itself until the air was filled with variations and improvisations.

The young shepherd was charmed. Never had he heard such music. The entire landscape was changed. His troubles were forgotten; his depression departed. For a moment he appeared to be his old self again. He strode forth, accosting in an attitude of good will the father and son whose minstrelsy had so delighted him. He quickly noted their Ethiopian features and wondered from whence they came.

Men of that race had from early days mingled with

the Jewish people. Indeed, their contacts in Egypt were constant. Moreover, Moses, the great lawgiver, had married a Midianite woman.

"Why wander ye up and down the land at this season of the year?" questioned Malchiah, saluting them.

"Ah, knowest thou not," replied the Ethiopian, "this is the season of the year when Jehovah has promised to make known unto his people, and all the faithful, a revelation of himself through the appearance of his Anointed? We have heard of this promise from the earliest days of the prophets, ever since my fathers became members of the household of the kings of Israel. That promise is unto all people and their children for all generations."

"Thou speaketh truth," replied the shepherd, "but by what sign have ye been led to undertake this minstrel journey? Ye are now within the vicinity of Bethlehem, the city of David, where that prophetic Son of the great King is expected to be born. Do you know of his appearance there?"

"It is in the land of Judah that we expect him," answered the minstrel. "It is written in the book of the prophet Micah, 'But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of

thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler of Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.' Surely, thou art acquainted with these sayings, for they are in the heart of all Israel."

"Dost thou expect to share in the fulfillment of the great hope of Israel?" inquired Malchiah. "How could that benefit the sons of Ethiopia? Are ye partakers of that promise?" continued the son of Jacob, as he coldly thrust forth his questions.

"More than thou art willing to concede," answered the elderly man as he brushed his hair back from his forehead, preparing to present a defense. "Why shouldst thou question this? If thou wert familiar with the prophets and the lawgivers, thou wouldst understand."

"I am justified in my insistence," the shepherd continued. "I know thee not. Whence comest thou? Thou mayest be a son of profligate ignorance, as well as a son of Cush."

"I am well accredited," responded the man. "I have been a scholar in the household of the good Candace, Queen of Ethiopia. My fathers dealt with your fathers. The rivers of my native land are mentioned by your poets; your psalmists sang of the topaz of Ethiopia. My people

have served thy people and have been instructed in all the mysteries of Israel. My forebears have been especially blessed, for they shared the wisdom of the Egyptians, who dwelt to the west of them, and were enlightened by the faith of the sons of Abraham, who dwelt to the east of them. Forget not that the sons of Cush were the children of Ham, who was begotten of Noah. Verily, it is true that out of the same loins came Shem, Ham, and Japheth. At the last we share the same traditions and claim the same progenitors."

The son of Jacob received this information with no display of interest. Indeed, he gazed upon the ground; stood on one foot digging his toe into the earth. He was wearied by the display of knowledge on the part of the Ethiopian.

"Share the same traditions, claim the same forebears," he answered, showing irritation; "nay, never, thou son of Ham! Our father Abraham was the friend of God, and Isaac was a child of promise. We trace our ancestry back to Jehovah, and share with no other sons of Adam the privileges and the promises of his providence."

The face of the minstrel lighted by an inner flame. Passion's fires refused to rise bearing heat to his eyes. He

called his son, that he might place his arm about the lad's neck, whose large eyes turned in trust and assurance toward his father.

"An ancestor of ours stood by the mighty prophet Jeremiah after thy people were carried away into the Babylonian captivity. In the days of Zedekiah the king, my distant grandsire gave one of his sons to captivity in the household of the royal palace. He was by name Ebed-Melech, and noted among the eunuchs of the king's household. Being an eunuch, he was not subject to the lusts and passions of other men. He had opportunity to live unto himself and improve his mind. The wide extent of his intelligence attracted the king's attention, who made himself always accessible to his Ethiopian eunuch. When Jeremiah, the prophet, was thrown into the dungeon, in which was a pit filled with mire and disease, and was left to perish without food and water, it was Ebed-Melech, my kinsman, who went to Zedekiah the king to report the unhappy situation of the prophet and to plead his cause, finally gaining authority to accomplish his release. Then it was that the king said unto Ebed-Melech, 'Take from hence thirty men with thee, and take up Jeremiah the prophet out of the dungeon, before he die.' This man of

authority, a member of my father's line, was a captain of men under the king.

"Believe me, O shepherd of Israel, it is true. The prophet dwelt in the house of my fathers after he had been cast out by those who intrigued against him. My brethren gave him friendship, showing themselves his neighbors. In gratitude Jeremiah dwelt in concealment with my people for a period, lest those who had persecuted him should discover his dwelling place. It was then that he more fully taught my fathers the hope of Israel and explained the expectation of the Jews concerning the coming of a Son of Abraham in whom all the nations of the earth should be blessed. It is because of our faith in the promises made by Jehovah through the voice of the prophet that I and my son are now come into this land."

Dropping his hands from the shoulders of the lad, he raised his arms aloft as if to speak. His deep-set eyes rolled as though inwardly moved by a mystical force suddenly seizing him. Turning his face to the sky, he announced:

"The day has come. The sign is in the galaxy of Jacob. He who is to be born King of the Jews, in fulfillment of the words of the mighty prophet, is at hand."

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WHERE THE SHADOWS LENGTHEN

Malchiah was distracted and ill at ease. "Yes, perhaps; but that is not finding my lost ewe and her lamb," he replied.

The Ethiopian minstrel for a moment failed to grasp the situation. The shepherd's reversion of mind to his sheep was too rapid for him to follow the descent.

"Hast thou lost a sheep?" he inquired, blinking his eyes and shaking himself, as though recalling his thought after a long divergence from earthly contact.

"Yes, I have lost a ewe and a lamb. The little one was without spot or blemish. It was a sacrificial lamb worthy of the altars of Jehovah."

"Perhaps I could help thee find it," suggested the minstrel. Closing his eyes and interlacing his fingers over his knees, the servant from the household of Candace gazed like a seer.

"It is early in the morning," he repeated. "I see a company of travelers going unto Jerusalem; men of the Diaspora, passing by a lonely place. They find a ewe and her lamb. The sheep appears to be astray and lost, and, there being no flocks or folds in that vicinity, they lay claim to the ewe and place her among the sheep of the shepherd accompanying them."

"What shall I do? I will follow them to the altars of Jehovah!" cried Malchiah, wringing his hands in despair. "I will have mine own! Reveal to me how I may discover those who have taken my lamb."

"It was a company from Antioch," replied the minstrel. "A blue pennant flies from a staff in the midst of the camp. But, be warned. Thy spirit may betray thee. He who seizes a lamb that has been providentially given will suffer the rebuke of Jehovah. The spotless of the flock are for sacrifice."

"Rebuke of Jehovah! May a man not claim his own? I will claim mine own at the cost of my heritage!" replied the shepherd, as he struck the earth with his staff.

"Why, one would take thee to be a son of Esau instead of the line of Jacob," answered the Ethiopian.

"What have I to fear from the hand of Jehovah?" inquired the irritated shepherd.

"Fear not? All men should fear the Lord. None should boast, neither speak with violence when standing before him. If thou layest thine hand upon that which he hath given never more will thy ewes bear white lambs," announced the sage of the household of Candace.

"I will have mine own," coldly repeated the ashen

lips of the son of Jacob. "On the morrow I will go. Farewell, minstrel of Ethiopia. May the Lord preserve thee and thy son until the day of the coming of the Messiah."

"Farewell, shepherd of the lost sheep," replied the Ethiopian, bowing low. "If thou hearest not the voice of God, the prophet will relate in the future the sad story of the lost shepherd who wandered in a hopeless wilderness with a mangy flock seeking the darkened paths to the plain of Bethlehem. If thou transgress the law of Jehovah, thou shalt be called 'the shepherd of the black sheep.' "

Malchiah's face darkened. Wheeling upon his heels, he disappeared, going back to his flocks and to his heart's desire. He would have his own!

THE BIVOUAC OF THE SHEPHERDS

WHEN Malchiah arrived with his dogs at the sheepfold the hour was late. The flocks had been folded. Seeking refreshment for his hunger, he soon found it provided by those anticipating his return. After eating eagerly he sought the resting place of the other shepherds, who lay dozing in their blankets, under the waning moon of a midnight sky. He related the story of his fruitless search during the day, and of his conversation with the Ethiopian minstrel, but withheld the nature of the curse pronounced if he should go to claim his own.

Scarcely had he finished his story ere a cry of alarm startled them all into action. A gray wolf was seen standing silhouetted against the sky on a distant hill, sending forth "the call of the pack," which echoed far up the valleys and into the ravines of every sequestered cove in all that region.

That call had set the night with a thousand dangers. Every shepherd was on his feet, and stealthy footsteps could be heard as the rounds about the outer border of the

flocks announced the work of locating the faithful dogs to keep watch against the marauder.

The silence of security finally stole over the scene. Weariness released hungry sleep, which stole across flocks and men, leaving both mantled by a blanket of oblivion.

It was ever so on the plain of Bethlehem. Round about that little village was a wide stretch of country edged by hills and intersected by small streams filled with crystal waters. That community had been a sheepfold since the days of David. There he had thrown his first stone with a sling his father Jesse had made for him. In yonder far-away thicket, hard by a rocky den, he had slain his first lion and encountered his first bear. Here he had played his harp and had sent forth his song until the countryside rang with the beauty of his voice and the matchless purity of his melody.

Every lad when inducted into the mysteries of the shepherd's craft among the flocks of Bethlehem was shown the paths over which David, the shepherd boy who became a king, led his sheep. The entire region abounded with traditions of him. The spirit of the boy David still lingered over the scene.

The paths leading across the fields and to the water-

ing places were old and dusty. The briars and brambles always held on their thorns and broken branches white ragged fleece torn from the backs of hurrying sheep. The fields in the dry season bore no blade of grass that had not battled for its life. The secret of that age-long sheep range was the abundant water.

Malchiah remained on guard during the first watch that night. Being the youngest shepherd, he could battle with lassitude until the claims of responsibility fell away. Then heavy drowsiness seized upon him. His watch finished, he wrapped his blanket about him, scarcely conscious of his action. With closed eyes he prayed, facing toward Bethlehem, as was the practice of devout shepherds before they closed their eyes in sleep, that he might be one of those who would behold that great Son of Jacob, the Lord's anointed, who prophets had predicted would be born in the City of David. Sleeping, he appeared as an immense chrysalis snugly laid upon the ground for an indefinite period of gestation. He slept hard, for the day had been long and his duties had carried him far afield. With him consciousness sank far away, causing a deep density to settle over body and soul.

The stars in the heavens receded into the fathomless

spaces of the wide stretches of the sky, while a cool wind began to blow out of the east and down from the heights. It came from sources that bewildered the leaves of the trees and the boughs of the pines. It grew in velocity until it raced over the fields and hurried with sibilation through thickets and cypress.

The older shepherds, more alert than youth, were quickly conscious of the atmospheric change. The eldest, Eleazar, threw his blanket down from his head and sat up, that he might the better understand what was happening. As he did so he discovered that his companions were likewise disturbed. They were intent upon something. Their faces were strained in listening. He too gave himself to the same concern. What was it they sought to hear? Was it the padded footstep of a wolf? Was it the bleating of the ewe sheep that had been lost that day?

Something was on the air. Melody sweet and low seemed to envelop the field. It came up from the earth. It came down from the sky. It moved on the wind. It appeared to be in the atmosphere as a charge of power that wrought out all conflicting elements and released peace and good will in every breath.

Eleazar first seemed to hear it with his soul. After

that he became conscious that he was hearing from outside his own being a song of exquisite sweetness. He sought to locate its source. The melody, increasing in volume, revealed the singers as though located in the heavens. It was an assemblage of celestial beings approaching from the unseen. They were expressing emotions of great joy, their faces in veiled brightness, caroling, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will to men."

The shepherds were on their knees in adoration. Malchiah slept. Eleazar approached him. He laid his hands upon the young shepherd. He sought to awaken him. His efforts were in vain. He turned back to his companions, who still continued upon their knees after the vision had vanished.

Then the aged shepherd learned that the angels had further announced: "We bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the City of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. . . . Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger."

Eleazar returned to the sleeping Malchiah. He shook him violently, seeking to awaken him. The youthful

shepherd appeared dead in the arms of Morpheus. His form was limp and lifeless, as though some narcotic had driven his senses deep into the depths of unconsciousness, leaving them with no desire to return.

Eleazar returned to his brethren. Counsel was taken amidst marked animation. The vision of the angels had lifted their long repressed emotions into intense exhilaration.

"The day of the Lord is at hand," they sang. "The fulfillment of the words of the prophets is now to be acclaimed."

"O, Israel, gird up thy loins; thine enemies shall see revealed the hand of the God of thy fathers."

"Sing, O Isaiah, prophet of Apocalypse, proclaim again thy reading on the hilltops of futurity, the glory of Emanuel's kingdom."

"Rise up, O Jeremiah, prophet of the downfall of Jerusalem. Lift from thy face the melancholy of thy distress. The matchless splendor of Jehovah has enfolded thee with the canopy of his eternal providence."

"Come, O Ezekiel, prophet by the waters of Babylon, singing midst the challenge of thy tongue, lest it cleave to the roof of thy mouth, and of thy right hand lest it for-

get its cunning; join with the angels of Bethlehem, touch the lips of the shepherds of the plains that they too may make melody in the glad hour of this heavenly benediction!"

Having finished their pæan of praise, the shepherds resolved, "Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us."

Malchiah slept. Eleazar for the third time sought to awaken him, without avail. At last the venerable shepherd placed his mouth to the ear of the sleeper and shouted: "The wolf, Malchiah, the wolf. The wolf is coming!"

Instantly the younger shepherd opened his eyes and leaped to his feet. Then Eleazar related the appearance of the caroling angels.

At first Malchiah did not understand. The story seemed unable to break through into his thought. Something was happening deep in his mind. Obviously, he was not giving himself to the words of his senior. Suddenly incredulity overcame him. He smiled as though moved by the influence of his own thought.

Malchiah laughed. Exasperated, Eleazar rebuked him. "It was the Ethiopian minstrel," he answered.

Again he laughed until the sound of his voice drew the attention of the other shepherds.

Sharp reproof checked him into silence. What did he mean, "The Ethiopian minstrel"?

Malchiah refused to explain. They pressed him, but he remained obdurate. Then they pleaded with him to go with them to Bethlehem to verify the thing that had been reported as coming to pass in the City of David.

"Who will care for the flocks? The hireling shepherds? It is all incredible. I will not be deceived. Leave me alone. I will stay with the sheep. No Son of David born of prophecy and promise would be laid in a manger. Men destined to be kings are born in palaces. Kings' sons are swaddled in silks and fine linen," he argued.

Again Malchiah laughed! The aged shepherd was grieved. His companions were incensed. He witnessed their attitude of disapproval. They stood apart some distance and counseled among themselves, frequently looking in his direction with condemning eyes. A strange, sinister hardness came into his soul as an impulse of resentment swept over him. "Let them go," he said to himself; "they will be wiser when they discover their mistake."

THE CAMP OF THE BLUE PENNANT

THAT day Malchiah called the under-shepherds and ordered an inspection of the flocks. The work was begun early, for the sheep were restless. Their large number required careful attention and continuous duty on the part of the herders. It was evident that he would be compelled to remain with the sheep that day. Their forage was short, the air was cold. Something was moving them to drill about on the field until they appeared as sheep without a shepherd. Ever and anon an old wether in the far distance would send forth an inarticulate call that would be answered from many parts of the field by a low murmur from ewes and half-grown lambs. They jostled one another, striking their heads carelessly into each other's sides, as though disturbed and irritated.

At length a silence fell across the fields. The older sheep lifted their heads toward the direction of the wind. Their nostrils worked, their eyes dilated, their bodies became animated. The air was carrying the scent of a vicious animal whom nature had taught them to fear.

An old ram with heavy horns scrambled upon a large

rock, turned with lifted nostrils from one point of the horizon to another, then, leaping to the ground, started to run in the opposite direction from whence the wind came. The sheep, following his lead, started after him, until their movement appeared as the rushing of many waters through a broken millrace.

The shepherd with his assistants started in pursuit, seeking by a long circuit to intercept and turn them back into the field. Much distance was covered. The task seemed almost impossible. The full force of all the fear instincts of the sheep had been released. They were deaf to the call of the shepherd and wild with delirious fright. Night was coming on; already the glens and gulches were shadowed by darkness. Some of the flocks would be lost; some would perish.

Malchiah prided himself on being a good shepherd. He ground his teeth in desperation. He would not lose a sheep now.

Suddenly, within a short distance of him, appeared the cause of his troubles. It stopped for a moment as it moved out of the thicket, stood up, sniffed the air, dropped down and started across the open field, trotting along as though oblivious of danger.

The sight of the bear transformed the shepherd. He became the incarnation of violence. His countenance hardened. All the animalism of his being surged to his face as he hissed: "They go to Bethlehem! I stay with the sheep."

His muscles tightened, stood out knotted, defiant upon his chest, his back and his limbs. Whipping a long knife from his belt, he started across the field toward the object of his wrath. His feet carried him bounding over the intervening space. Before the animal knew what was happening he had leaped upon it, driving his weapon into its back, not seriously wounding it, but causing it to rage at him in the wildness of blind fury.

With a howl of pain it tore itself loose from his hold and turned upon him for mortal combat. It leaped at him. Like a panther he sprang aside, driving another stroke with his knife, causing the animal great distress. It sought to turn from him, for it was sorely wounded. His advantage transformed him into a demon. He leaped upon the animal with a fury that was akin to the spirit of a vicious beast. He drove home one blow after another until the marauder fell to the ground, dispatched with a wound in its vitals. He had not finished. His rage had

THE TRILITHON

not spent itself. He bore down upon the body. He cut the shaggy coat into strips.

At last, bloody, ashen, ghastly, he stood back contemplating the heroism of his deed. Then he laughed, loud, hysterical, maniacal laughter, as though reason had departed from him. He had driven himself beyond his strength. Emotion began to subside. He fell limp upon the ground muttering, "Yes, Bethlehem! I stayed with the sheep!"

Early the next morning he was found by a searching party. His absence had been discovered at midnight. He had a wound across his breast that had bled profusely, but not sufficiently to give them alarm, though it had decidedly weakened him. He suffered from exhaustion. He was as one out of whom had gone the last vestige of vitality. His fury had wrought mightily upon his spirit as well as upon his body. He was prostrated by his storm of rage against the animal he had slain. Something within him had gone wrong. The man of strength and courage was limp and pliable as flesh without animation. For three days he lay in his tent refusing to be disturbed except by those who came to bring him nourishment.

The stampeding flocks had been folded without loss.

The shepherds had returned from Bethlehem. His strength having been restored sufficiently, he was told the story of their quest. It was all like a dream. He had no inner response to it. The story carried no thrill for his spirit.

"O well," said he, "what if I had not stayed with the sheep?" He thought of the Ethiopian minstrel, then smiled derisively as he stretched out his limbs with an expression of satisfaction.

IN QUEST OF HIS SHEEP

AFTER six days Malchiah had fully recovered. He recalled his lost ewe and lamb. The words of the son of Cush came back to him. "I must have my own," was his inner rejoinder. "The Ethiopian cannot change his skin, neither can Malchiah forget his sheep. I will go forth and find the place of bivouac of those who follow the standard of the blue pennant." Hardness appeared upon his face in the display of an indomitable resolution, the quality of which portrayed evil.

The steel had entered the soul of Malchiah. He appeared not as the man of pre-Bethlehem days. His youth was gone. As a mature man ready to endure hardness and to try his strength in violence and fire, he walked among his fellows. He had achieved the coveted record of David —he had slain a bear; he was ready for Goliath.

On the seventh day after the episode of Bethlehem, he found himself on the road following directions obtained from a sojourner who had informed him that the company from Antioch was midway between Bethany and Jerusa-

lem. That night he made his sanctuary at the foot of a hill within sight of that little village. He was able to discern the location of other camps in the distance. Perhaps the one he sought was a short distance away. He would wait.

The first beam of light the following morning awakened him. The highway to Jerusalem rose from the valley ascending the ridge beyond which could be seen the walls of the Holy City. An extension of low hills spread away in both directions. No travelers could be seen at that early hour. The village was at his left as he looked toward the south.

In the distance was a promontory of strange attractiveness. It was rugged and steep, strewn with many large stones, as though quarried in that vicinity generations ago. On the top of it, silhouetting itself against the sky, was a trilithon composed of two upright posts and a beam resting across the top. In the early morning light it appeared as a portal to the dominion of ineffable day, curtained by the blue draperies of the sky. It was located on the east side of the valley. On three days of the year the sun rose at the side of it, in the center of it, and on the other side of it, making its journey southward.

Malchiah knew of this natural phenomenon but did not think of it at that moment, for he was bent on discovering his sheep. The trilithon fascinated him.

The light crept up from the east side of the hill. Then Malchiah remembered and wondered at the entrancing beauty of the eastern sky.

Watching intently the weaving of the mantle of gold, he discovered one running with great haste toward the brow of the hill, then another following. The first was obviously seeking the trilithon. He threw his arms around one of its standards and raised himself to its top. He walked to the center of the cross beam, turned his face toward the village, his back to the east, raised his arms, appearing in cruciform attitude against the golden mantle of morning. The other on the ground, with zither in hand, accompanied the lad while he sang:

"O Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God.

"Behold, the Lord God will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him: behold, his reward is with him, and his work before him.

"He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young."

The song carried across the valley until all the countryside was astir. The eastern heavens were aflame with matchless light, before which stood the boy, high and lifted up on the trilithon. In a moment he was gone. The day was on, and the world trudging forward into another period of light.

Malchiah went forth to find his sheep. He approached a camp from which flew a blue pennant. Upon inquiry he discovered the members thereof to be from Antioch. They were tradesmen and petty merchant-men. The sounds of tinkling bells and of sniffing sheep and scuffling feet were to be heard on every hand.

A young traveler and his wife had preceded him into camp and were engaging the master merchant-man in conversation. The woman had in her arms a child scarcely a fortnight old. She held it in her arms with manifest solicitude. Her face frequently turned toward it with an affection characteristic of young mothers.

Malchiah heard the father say, "The child is eight days old. We are on our way to Jerusalem for circum-

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HARD BY A ROCKY DEN

cision and the purification of the mother, in obedience to the law of Moses. We are in need of a sacrificial lamb."

"I have but one," the merchant was heard to reply. "It is the most beautiful lamb I have ever possessed, without spot or blemish. I have discovered it to be less than six months old. It was evidently born out of season. It has a strange natural marking on its forehead, which is not in the skin but in the fleece, a touch of gold so small that only one making a close observation can discover it. I have its dam also. Would you like to see them?"

The young father walked toward a small flock of sheep that had been separated from the others and confined. Malchiah waited. He knew he had but to call and the ewe would come bounding to him. The sheep and the lamb were released. They came walking forth with manifest trepidation. The price was inquired and the young father returned to counsel with the mother. "The price is rather more than I care to pay," he was heard to say. "I fear I am unable to purchase the lamb."

"Why does that matter?" responded the young mother. "Is there not some other way by which we may interpret the instruction of Moses? He teaches that the first-born male child belongs to the Lord. Does this one

not belong to him? The ceremonial lamb is given by the parents that they may redeem, or purchase, or give in exchange their first born. Do we want this child back? Does it not belong to God? Is there any lamb, however perfect, that we may give in exchange for it that we may call our first-born our own? Is not this 'the Lamb of God' given to us whereby all Israel shall be blessed? Let us leave it with him."

Malchiah did not understand. He permitted the conversation to pass as something without interest. He wanted his sheep.

The young man returned to the merchant-man. The shepherd from the plain of Bethlehem resolved to terminate the discussion. He called his sheep. The ewe knew his voice. With an answer of recognition it ran to him, followed closely by the lamb. The merchant-man turned to discover what had happened.

"I have come for my sheep that was lost," announced the shepherd in tones that permitted no controversy. The ownership was indisputable. The young father with eagerness sought to purchase of him.

"I will not sell my lamb," responded Malchiah; "I have purchased the sheep with a great price," he continued,

as he bared the scar on his breast, not realizing, for some reason, that he was simulating.

The young father was impressed, but in mild voice he urged consideration of his offer to buy. "Your lamb is without spot or blemish. I am in need of an offering for my first-born," he urged; "why not sell to me in the name of Jehovah? He will bless your flocks. You will be given others."

"Nay, I will not sell," replied the shepherd. "This lamb has the marking of the golden fleece. It is the choice of all my sheep. I cannot give it up."

Without lingering he turned and walked away, followed by the ewe and her lamb.

Back to the vicinity of Bethlehem he went. Having found his own he claimed it, regardless of the altar of Jehovah or of the wishes of his fellow men. Love of his own was a barrier that stood between him and the hope of Israel; yea, between him and the most sacred ordinance of the Temple.

THE WISE MEN

A FORTNIGHT had passed since Malchiah recovered his sheep. It was late in the afternoon when he sat watching his flocks as they listlessly grazed and languidly rested as though the work of the day was done. The hour was drawing near when they should be folded for the night. A crisp breeze was blowing, causing the shepherd to tighten his cloak. He appeared to be indifferent as to the course he should take at that moment. In a spirit of indecision he slumped back upon the ground, sinking into an attitude of absent-mindedness. There he remained for a time motionless. Obviously he was engaged in thought as one fascinated by an object which would not release him.

The evening came on apace. The sheep now moved restlessly about. The herders were calling the dogs to round up the stragglers, while the sound of tramping feet filled the air. Malchiah appeared not to see his flocks as they worked back and forth waiting for his word of command.

Suddenly a young dog started up bristling with

alarm. He rushed forward, breaking into a great rage. Others joined in pursuit as they furiously threw themselves toward the highway, which at that place made its exit from an extended depression between two ridges of rolling ground. They had seen objects moving along the submerged road which later proved to be the dusty turbans of three travelers accompanied by a small train of attendants, passing from Jerusalem in the direction of Bethlehem.

"Call off your dogs, my good man," requested one of them with a smile. "We are peaceable men traveling in your country from the east. We would know the way to a village among these hills. Dost thou know the location of 'the City of David'?"

The commotion had aroused Malchiah from his abstraction. The welfare of his flocks had quickly brought him to his feet. He approached the inquirers to learn their identity and to assist them in any way possible.

"Do you mean Bethlehem?" he answered. "That village is but a short distance from here."

Approaching the travelers he discovered them to be men of high intelligence on a mission of particular interest. They were mounted on camels covered by silken blankets

decorated with solitary stars and crescent moons set on a blue background finished in gray, whose sheen indicated clouds of a summer sky. Their own garments were the elaborate costumes of studied refinement. The blending of colors was perfect. The drape of the cloak, which fell in folds, was rich and luxurious. The faces of the men were smooth and unscarred, displaying a fullness that had never been set upon by the ravages of hunger and distress. They bore the appearance of men who had not faced the hot blasts of the desert, and whose spirits had not suffered from the pessimism of the prevailing temper of the unprotected life. Their deep-set eyes and well-rounded faces presented a field upon which appeared at times the power of an inward spirit living in great assurance under the influence of ideals and dominant faith. Evidently they were men of character and of more than passing intelligence. Moreover, they were not of the merchant class; neither could they be placed among the priestly craft. Their large and colorful turbans indicated that they were Persians and scholars whose master was Zoroaster.

"Yes, it is Bethlehem," answered the spokesman, a man of dignified mien. "We have been instructed by Herod, the tetrarch, that the prophets wrote of a King

of Israel who should be born at Bethlehem. We have seen his star in the East and have come to worship him."

Malchiah, being uninstructed in the intricate forms of prophecy, did not understand. He was familiar with the statements about the City of David in which his people placed their hopes for Israel's restoration to independence and the re-establishment of the ancient throne of Jehovah's holy people. He was ignorant of the place of the star in the Messianic revelation.

"Yes," he haltingly answered. "The City of David is just beyond that range of hills. Shall I have one of my shepherds escort you thither? The day is almost gone. Shortly the shadows of the night will be upon you."

"Nay, we fear not the night," came the answer. "We are men of the stars. They guide us through a trackless way. We trust in them. They chart the darkness for us. As yet none of us has fallen into a pit."

The shepherd was a man of few words, especially when in the presence of those who awed him by their intelligence and freedom in conversation. He sought to slip away. The sheep appeared to demand his attention. He ordered his herders to turn them toward the fold for the night. He was detained by the unexpected evening

song of Israel filling the air about him. It came down as from the sky, assuming no form and eschewing all direction. It was melody in diffusion but without location; audible, without source. It seemed not to come, as though it were instantaneously present. It appeared not to pass, as though it were borne upon the air, which, laden with harmonious strains of beauty, became articulate, registering the passing of the day.

The travelers were silent, with heads in worshipful attitude and hands crossed upon their breasts. They heard the song, but discerned not from whence it came.

"Thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting."

Malchiah also was deeply moved. He knew the source of the song. He looked toward Bethany, beyond the hills as he faced Jerusalem. It was the voice he had heard previously. Did it come from the trilithon? Were the Ethiopian minstrels still in that vicinity? Why did they linger? he wondered. While he thought about the possible meaning of it all, one of the men ordered his servant to run back and ascertain from whence the music

came. Upon the return of the servant he informed his master that the singers were approaching beyond the bend in the road.

The train of travel-worn camels was prepared for the arrival of the musicians, which was not delayed. In a moment they came in sight. The father and son were given a greeting in the highest form of Eastern culture. The disciples of Zoroaster dismounted, waiting in state for their approach, before whom they bowed low, even to the ground, placing their foreheads between the palms of their hands. The courtesy was returned with equally elaborate form and was witnessed by the shepherd, whose mind, untutored in social amenities, was overwhelmed to stupefaction.

"Thou too, Ethiopia!" exclaimed a voice among the scholars. "Hast thou also been led to the loins of Jacob for the hope of mankind?"

"We are here," responded the father of the lad, "singing the songs of Israel under the direction of the prophet Jeremiah, who taught our people the story of Messiah, in whom all the nations of the earth will be blessed."

"We are disciples of Zoroaster," answered Melchior, an aged man with long white hair and a sweeping beard.

"Dost thou speak the name of Jeremiah the prophet? Our master learned the story of the Messiah from him. That prophet lived in the period during the breaking up of Israel, when the priests, scholars, leaders, and rulers were taken in exile to Babylon."

"Yes, our master became a prophet himself through the influence of Jeremiah," asserted Caspar, another of the wise men, a beardless youth with a ruddy face. "Zoroaster taught us concerning Messiah. In fulfillment of his words are we now come within the bounds of the land of Israel. He declared that in the latter days a pure virgin would conceive and that as soon as the child was born a star would appear, blazing even at noonday with undiminished luster."

The imagination of the youthful Caspar flamed with enthusiasm as he recalled his master's words.

"Yea, moreover," he continued, "our master assured us that our nation would perceive it before any other people because our astrologers ever study the heavens, marking the course of the stars. Furthermore, he advised that as soon as the star was seen we should follow it wherever it might lead, with the expectation that it would bring us to the mysterious child to whom we should offer gifts of

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AFTER A LONG JOURNEY

gold and precious stones in profound humility. He is the Almighty Word, which created the heavens and the earth."

The scholar from the court of Queen Candace answered with profound dignity. "We have not the voice of astrologers, neither the support of philosophers in our visitation at this time of the land of Israel. The day of the prophecy is at hand. We are now in the cycle of its fulfillment. We, from Ethiopia, greet you as those who share in the hope of the Messiah, because our fathers sat at the feet of the great prophet. You of the East extend the hand of fellowship to us because your fathers also learned from the same master the story in prophetic form of the appearance of God's Anointed, in whom the fulfillment of the deepest hopes of the human soul shall find expression."

Malchiah, the shepherd, stood apart, fascinated by what he heard but strangely disturbed by it all.

Then spoke Balthasar, a swarthy, strong, bearded man, slow of speech, heavy of voice, of penetrative mind and indomitable will: "The time is fulfilled. The sign is in the galaxy of Pisces. That is the constellation of Jacob. Out from that aggregation of brilliance should come the

pole-star of our hopes. We have sighted it without the possibility of controversy. We have identified its course. At first we saw it as a strange sight in the heavens. Two bright planets, Jupiter and Saturn, came close together. They then seemed to separate and swing away in opposite directions. After five months we saw them again change their course, starting for a position where they would meet. On their way they were, to our amazement, joined by Mars. While we watched this stellar drama they formed a fiery trigon in the constellation of Pisces. That was the 'star out of Jacob.' The hour of prophecy had struck. Our master Zoroaster's words were being fulfilled. The attention of others of our guild was called to this remarkable appearance. Another was discovered which caused astrologers to predict the birth of a new era among men. A new star was located in 'the constellation of the Serpent.' This grew into great brilliance till it glowed like a planet, then its luster waned, its white light turned to yellow, then to red, grew duller and dimmer, then vanished altogether. The stars have called us forth in search of the one born King of the Jews. Will ye go with us in our search? This shepherd informs us the City of David is but a short distance away."

"It is just beyond the rim of yonder sky-line," replied the minstrel. "Shall we accompany you?"

Malchiah saw them continue their journey. A strange fire began to burn within him as he turned away to follow the path to the sheepfold. He had a strong impulse to accompany the wise men. It was a short distance. He could return before nightfall. He might see for himself. Then curiosity began to move him. A princeling of Israel, who would not take delight in seeing? Where would the child be found? In a palace? Who would be his father? In a humble home? Who would be his mother? These questions could be answered if he would go and see, if he would relinquish his obstinacy.

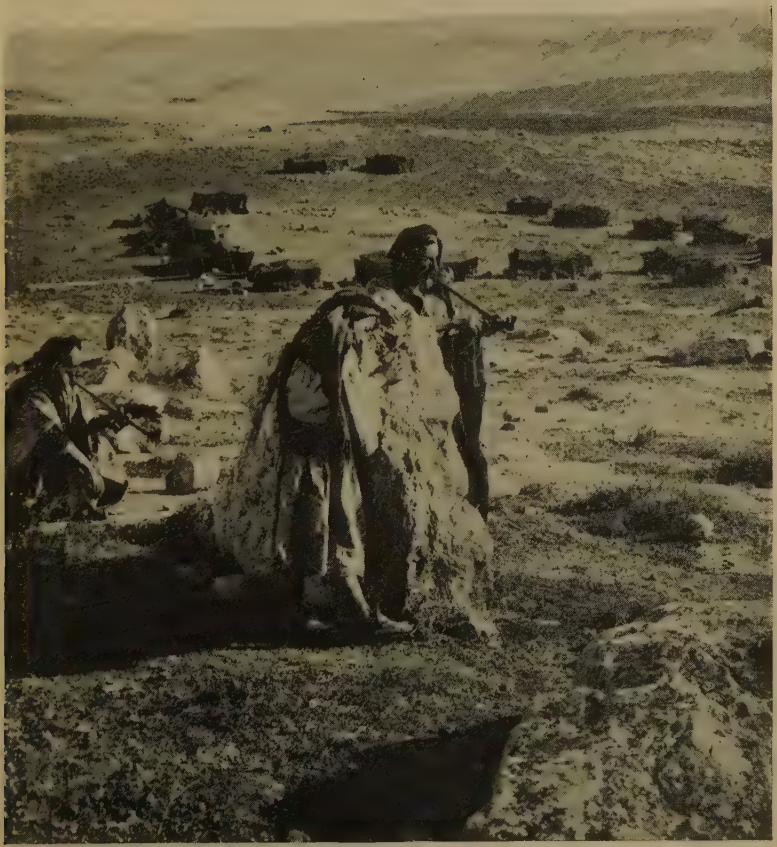
He looked at his sheep. His indecision increased. He followed the direction of the disappearing travelers. What had happened at Bethlehem? He was precipitated into an inner conflict. Why should he follow those dreamers? They were the victims of their own fabrications. They were obsessed, deluded.

"Why not go and see for yourself, Malchiah?" came a question from the depths of his soul. "Why should I go when I know they are deceived? I am familiar with the Ethiopian minstrels in this region."

"Why the appearance of these men from the East?" another voice argued.

Then he himself appeared to take the debate in hand. "Singing angels! Moving stars! What a pretense at reality! They are a delusion! I will not permit myself to be led astray from the hard facts by sentimentality. Let them go. I will stay with my sheep."

He smiled with a cynical sneer which appeared to spread over his countenance, outlining itself in the attitude of his entire form. It went deep into his being, opening up avenues of emotional expression which had formerly been closed. It marked the beginning of the darkening of his spirit. The Ethiopian could not change his skin, nor the leopard his spots, but Malchiah began to lose the whiteness of his soul.



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AT THE CLOSE OF DAY

BETHLEHEM, A FRAUD

THE young shepherd found himself among the sheep of his flocks. He had maintained his reputation; no sheep of his had ever been lost. He permitted nothing to divert him from his one task. He had paid a great price for this record—far more than he really knew. He had pitted his life against that of a beast and had triumphed, but the animal within his own bosom had raged into ruthless violence, had broken its confinement, and had taken possession of his own inner life. He had resisted sentiment and exposed himself to doubt and cynicism. The scars of battle were upon him. The tender shepherd had been transformed into a fighter and a defender of the flock. His mind no longer found its fascination in breeding and developing the quality of his sheep, but in tending and protecting them. He was found always looking for trouble. He saw more wolves, discovered more bear tracks than any other shepherd. He grew combative, always ready for controversy. This change began shortly after his return from the regions of Bethany.

The shepherds of Bethlehem marked this alteration.

They began to feel that a curse was upon him. He had laughed at their story of the singing angels, and had refused to go with them to see the new-born Child. Had he incurred the wrath of God? Surely the presence of the Divine Spirit had been withdrawn from him. Had he become Jehovah's castaway? He became the problem of the sheepfold in the vicinity of Bethlehem. He cut himself off from fellowship with his kind. He came to be designated, "the shepherd with the soul of a leopard."

While others sang the songs of Israel, Malchiah remained apart and appeared obdurate. His flocks were his chief concern. As the years passed his herders suffered from his inconsiderateness. He drove them to their tasks, and ruthlessly rebuked them when negligent. He grew violent in temper. When displeased he became explosive and abusive, then would retire into himself, giving no expression of regret, neither displaying the least evidence of repentance.

Upon a day when the clouds hung low in the sky and the hills were drenched with rain, during the weeks of early spring, one of the herders, a docile and harmless man, was found bruised and lamed lying under a tree where he had dragged himself for shelter. After his wounds were

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THE SHEPHERD OF THE BLACK SHEEP

dressed and nourishment given he refused to talk. For some reason he had no story to tell. Even under pressure he maintained a distressing silence. When driven in the interests of all the shepherds of that vicinity to relate his story for their protection, he sobbed out his refusal as though he had received a greater wound on his soul. The cause of his suffering remained a profound mystery.

Meanwhile, Malchiah appeared sullen and morose among his flocks. His hands were cold and his fingers blue as they frequently closed on his palms. He was ill at ease as he went from place to place visiting his herders. At his appearance they became reticent, communicating with him no longer than courtesy demanded. Then they were away after some straying sheep, while he was left to further pursue his journey at his own pleasure.

The next morning he was manifestly ill. He remained in his tent all day. Late in the afternoon another shepherd, by name Hosea, was passing that way and sought to speak unto him of the prosperity of his flocks. "Is the favor of the Lord upon thy flocks, Malchiah?" inquired Hosea.

"Nay, not for these past months," came the terse answer.

"Have not thy ewes borne thee many lambs this season?" questioned the visitor.

"They have been far from satisfactory. Perhaps Jehovah hath done his part, but I have no protection from the gods of fate and misfortune. Scarcely two nights ago a score of my lambing ewes died upon their backs. I found them myself, their feet toward the stars, their heavy wool soaked with rain.

"Where was the herder?" he exclaimed with manifest wrath, which darkened his face with a deep shadow. "Yes, where was the herder? Asleep, asleep, while my ewes were struggling for their lives. Behold my loss when I left my tent for a short journey. I have guided my flocks with my own hand through the breeding season. I have counted the lambs and prepared them for the market. I have trained my herders for the work of shearing. I have not neglected my duty. Why this misfortune? What matters the breeding season if the flocks are not prolific? What value is the shearing if the wool is short? Why trouble over sheep if they cannot be marketed? What profit can a man have when the hireling sleeps while the sheep perish?"

"Nay, not so, Malchiah," curtly replied Hosea; "love

for the sheep is the shepherd's high incentive. He giveth his life for the sheep. He loveth his flock and carries the lambs in his bosom. He goeth to the market with a heavy heart. There he must part with that which he has loved as his own."

"There are to me two seasons of the year," replied the shepherd, "the springtime, when the flock increases, and the shearing time, when the flock produces wool. Both contribute to that value for which folds are built and sheep are nurtured. Without this there could be no shepherds and sheepfolds would soon be turned to the wolf and the jackal."

"But the sheep, the sheep, Malchiah," cried Hosea. "Dost thou not love the sheep, the flock, the fold and the lambs? Hast thou ceased to have the shepherd's heart who goeth out at midnight to recover the lamb that has strayed just for love of the innocent creature that may be helpless among the briars and thorns? Hast thou become the hireling shepherd who careth not when his sheep are in distress?"

"Thou speakest harshly, Hosea, my brother," replied Malchiah, his face blanched by pain. "I serve the sheep for what they return to me. I love them not because they

are sheep but for what they do and for what they bring in wealth and gain. They represent possessions. I hold them in esteem as they increase. Was it not so with our father Abraham?"

"Yes, it was so with his nephew Lot, who set his house toward Sodom," answered Hosea, as he pulled his coat about him, turning to pursue his journey.

"Doubtless you have heard of the attack upon one of your herders?" Hosea remarked with a quizzical look, as he laid his hand on the flap of the tent.

"Yes, yes, he is the unworthy hireling whose negligence caused my ewes to perish," Malchiah replied, rising and moving nervously toward his crook, marked with recent stains.

Hosea was gone. The night had fallen. Malchiah was alone. Were his flocks folded? Yes, if others had been faithful.

AFTER MANY YEARS

ALL day the hot rays of the sun burned down on the wide stretches of the desert. Hour by hour the wind blew as though out of a furnace. All day the waves of heat ran up and down the sand, as though chasing every living thing into hiding. Hour by hour the weight of a listless day bore down upon the earth as though all the processes of nature had been restrained by a lifeless flaw in the wide expanse of human vision.

All day the aged shepherd Malchiah sat within his tent gazing ever and anon toward Jerusalem. The far call within his soul was seeking to awaken memories of the past. Hour by hour the spirit of loneliness swept over him, while his flocks lay in the meager shade of the palms hard by the wells of Jacob in the region of Gaza.

In the distant jungle that fringed the northern edge of the desert the leopard lay at mid-day, panting in the heat, bathing its feet in the waters of an oozing spring and languidly stretching them, revealing the forms of sharp claws that had preyed upon the unwary sheep of that vicinity. The world of tooth and claw seemed waiting

for the late afternoon, when it would break into action, converting that scene of tranquillity into a drama of strife and death.

The shepherd neither waited nor lingered. He appeared utterly indifferent toward his surroundings. No impulse stirred him. No instinct disturbed him. The years had broken him. They had borne him forward as though destiny cared naught for what he might become. The spell of Jerusalem was upon him now as it had visited him from time to time through the years, always at the last conquering him.

He raised his dark, watery eyes again toward the direction of the Holy City. He was a picture of forlorn abandonment. His long white hair lay tangled and matted upon his shoulders. His deep sunken cheeks drew his lips tightly over his ragged teeth; while his face gave forth the impression of one who had struggled with death and lost.

At length resolution began to master him. He would go to Jerusalem. Then hesitation seized him. "In that vicinity is Bethlehem." The resolution gave way. "I will stay with my sheep," momentarily prevailed.

A tremor shook his frame. He tried to speak the

By Ewing Galloway, N Y

A WELL IN THE DESERT

word in irony: "Beth"—it became inarticulate. Something seized him by the throat. "Beth—Beth—!" His face worked until his eyes poured forth tears and his mouth formed expressions of agony. He clutched at the invisible hands choking him. In violent action he rose up, then sank, helpless, back upon the ground.

It was the beginning of his last struggle against the claims of Bethlehem. He recovered himself, to find that he could not speak the word as of old. He appeared as one stunned by a blow.

"Bethlehem—the City of David," the sacred name written in promise on the hearts of all the faithful could not be sounded forth by lips that had associated it with fraud. The wages of doubt and denial were at last being paid by the withered hand of incipient dementia. He must flee the desert. To linger there meant darkness and death.

He would dispose of his sheep. Merchant-men traveling from Egypt to Jerusalem and the East, passing over the nearby route, would be glad to purchase of him. Moreover, his flocks were an indifferent aggregation. They lacked uniformity as to grade and breeding. They were yellow and brown and black and spotted. There was not

a pure white among them. They were as sheep without a shepherd who cared to build them into a flock of quality by the close application of intelligence.

He arose to observe the trade route in the remote distance. He staggered as one weary beyond the support of his own strength. Refreshing himself with water and food, again he resolved to venture forth toward the trail skirting the edge of the sandy waste. This time he was successful; but a great exhaustion was upon him.

Slowly he approached the much-traveled course. He discovered drawing near a small cavalcade. He awaited its arrival. The strangers saw him, and, taking him to be a man of the desert asking alms, they tossed him coins. He refused their gifts with a display of contempt, whereupon the travelers made a show to converse with him. He sought to answer them, but stammered as one stricken. They lifted their brows and turned aside to a clump of trees in the distance where flowed a stream of water, there to make camp and rest their wearied bodies.

The leader of the entourage was an Ethiopian. As he rode in a chariot he appeared as one having authority. He held in his hand a book from which he had been reading. While they lingered a lone traveler drew near, and,

accosting the man of authority, asked, "What readest thou?"

"The book of Isaiah, the prophet," answered the Ethiopian.

"Understandeth thou what thou readest?" questioned the traveler.

"How can I, except some man should guide me?" was the frank response.

Then the aged shepherd drew near to listen unto the instruction.

"He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth," was read aloud that all might hear. "In his humiliation his judgment was taken away; and who shall declare his generation? for his life is taken from the earth."

"Of whom speaketh the prophet this?" eagerly inquired the listener. Then the man began at the same scripture, relating the story of Jesus of Nazareth.

A strange light began to burn in the eyes of the shepherd as the story continued. At the repetition of the word "Bethlehem," he muttered a response, sinking unconscious to the ground.

Stimulants were administered and he awakened to

find the hand of the Ethiopian under his head and dark eyes looking down into his face.

"Whence comest thou, good shepherd?" he tenderly inquired. "I am a man of authority. If I can serve thee, speak. I am a eunuch of the household of the aged Queen Candace of Ethiopia. I have charge of all her treasures. My bounty is measured by her generosity. If thou desirest to know, I have been up at Jerusalem for to worship and was returning, sitting in my chariot reading Isaiah, the prophet, when thou didst detain me and this retinue."

The shepherd was unable to understand. Something back in the past was seeking to come forward in his mind. There was a quality in that voice which recalled the days of his youth. He strained for it, lapsing into unconsciousness. After awhile he again opened his eyes, but was held in great weakness. Strange words came to his ears.

"See, here is water, what doth hinder me to be baptized?" he heard the eunuch say.

"If thou believest with all thine heart thou mayest," he heard the interpreter reply.

"I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God," came the confession from the eunuch.

Then the stricken man witnessed a drama of weird

human interest. Together the two went down into the water. The interpreter baptized the Ethiopian in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, as the Son of God who taketh away the sin of the world, declaring, "Thou shalt be known as the first convert beyond the pale of Israel."

Then came the eunuch to the shepherd to further minister unto him.

"Who is this Jesus of whom thou speakest?" whispered the man of the desert.

"Dost thou not know him? Hast thou not heard of him?" responded the good man of the household of Queen Candace. "Art thou a father in Israel and knowest not what has happened in these past days? Who art thou, that I may know thee?"

"I am Malchiah, the shepherd," came the reply from the faltering lips of the aged man. "Who is this Jesus?"

The eunuch did not reply. A quizzical look passed over his face. Presently he repeated, "Malchiah, Malchiah. Can this man be the shepherd whom I met when a mere lad near Bethlehem? Then he was seeking a lost ewe and her lamb."

"Were you ever in the region of Bethlehem?" he inquired.

"Beth-Beth—lehem," came the almost inarticulate answer as the man gasped and strangled in manifest pain.

"Did you ever meet an Ethiopian minstrel in that region when you were in search of a lost ewe?"

"Yes-I—remember," faintly responded the shepherd.

"I am the lad who sang the songs of Zion with my father, who accompanied me on the zither. He has long been gathered unto his fathers and I have succeeded to his position. He of whom I sang then has been given Israel, and the glory of the God of Abraham has broken forth upon the earth in the effulgence of a new day for the sons of men."

"Who is this Jesus of Nazareth?" whispered the rapidly sinking man.

"He was the Child born at Bethlehem the night the angels sang, 'Peace on earth, good will to men.' His birth was also witnessed to by the followers of Zoroaster, who was taught the mystery of Israel's Messiah by the prophet Jeremiah. Melchior and his associates saw the star in the East and came to Bethlehem to worship Him."

The aged shepherd was seized by a paroxysm. "Nay, not so! Beth-Beth-lehem was a fraud," he moaned bitterly.

"If thou hadst not stayed with the sheep thou wouldst have known the truth," came the reply.

"I could—not—see! I could—not—hear," came from the throat where the death rattle rose with its long fingers grasping at the chords of life.

"Lift me!" he whispered. "I see—above the village—against the sky—the trilithon—the cruciform!" His head fell upon his breast.

Then saith Philip unto the eunuch, for it was he who baptized, "Verily, at the last, he saw "the Crucified."

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